FBI wiretapped Lawyers Guild

F Post 8/25/77

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI wiretapped the National Lawyers Guild and may have burglarized guild members' offices in Washington and New Haven, Conn., in the late 1940s and early 1950s, according to newly disclosed FBI files.

The guild is a national organization of lawyers and legal workers which was founded in 1937 to work for civil rights and civil liberties. It was attacked as a Communist-front organization during the "Red scare" era of the 1950s.

The guild recently filed a multimillion-dollar damage suit accusing the FBI and other government agencies of illegal harassment and disruption of legitimate guild activities.

In the course of the lawsuit, the FBI was required to provide the guild with 21,000 pages of bureau files on the organization and its members.

Guild officials said in a written statement Wednesday they have analyzed 4,500 pages and found "ample evidence of the bureau's early campaign to silence criticisms" from the guild.

The documents show that the FBI tapped telephones in the guild's national office in Washington from 1947 to 1951. (The guild has since moved the national office to New York.)

An FBI memo Nov. 5, 1947, to J. Edgar Hoover, then the FBI director, described a conversation between two guild officials and said, "This information was obtained from the technical surveillance which is maintained on the office of Martin Popper, vice president of the National Lawyers Guild." The memo said "a complete transcript of the conversation" was being sent to Hoover.

The guild and the National Emergency Civil Liberties Foundation Inc., which represents the guild in the lawsuit, contend that the wiretaps were illegal.

Under present law and court decisions, such wiretaps conducted without judicial warrants would be illegal. But the law on wiretaps in that era was considerably fuzzier.

The guild and the foundation said the documents show that FBI agents in 1948 apparently broke into the Yale Law School office of Professor Thomas I. Emerson, then the guild president, to photograph an article Emerson was writing for the Yale Law Journal.

Hoover wrote the New Haven FBI office on June 16, 1948: "It is desired that you discreetly attempt to ascertain if Professor Emerson is preparing some article or treatise" discussing Hoover's recent congressional testimony.

The New Haven agent reported a month later that an FBI informer at Yale "has been unable to ascertain" Emerson's plans.

But on Sept. 22, 1948, the New Haven office sent FBI headquarters

offices

"photographs of an article prepared by Professor Emerson."

Guild officials said the timing of the incident and the language of the memos suggest that the photographs were obtained in a break-in at Emerson's office.

In addition, "there is strong evidence that in 1949 the FBI broke into the guild's Washington national office three times in order to microfilm the guild's membership list and drafts of another article which exposed FBI wiretapping," said the statement prepared by the guild and the foundation.